

LOUISE HOMER



*Gluck • Handel
Tchaikovsky
Meyerbeer • Gounod*

*Saint-Saëns
Schubert • Delibes
Songs of Sidney Homer*

Pearl

LOUISE HOMER

By Katherine Homer Fryer

How can I, a daughter, begin to describe the beautiful human being that was my mother? Perhaps my father put it best when he described her portrayal of Orfeo in his book *'My Wife and I'*. 'Orfeo was the high point in my wife's career,' he wrote. 'Nothing made her so happy. Here was a pure soul and a noble quest. To portray the part of Orfeo she had only to be herself.' And I can quote from the editorial in the New York Times following her death on 6 May 1947: Louise Homer was a shining figure in the Golden Age of Opera. A native American, she matched her voice with the best in the world and none privileged to hear her can ever forget its rich magic . . .

At the Metropolitan she never sang

just to the Diamond Horseshoe. Hers was long the voice of America. But



in the hearts of the public she was more than just an opera star. In her marriage to Sidney Homer, the song writer and her early teacher, she united musical and domestic harmony. For more than half a century she was a happy wife and mother to six gifted children. It was characteristic of her

last serene years that they should have been spent helping young people to the success she so long enjoyed.

This will be the first CD of my mother's recordings. I hope it will be the first of several. During the past year, while Ward Marston was making transfers of my mother's recordings at my request, he fell in

love with her voice. He offered to produce a Louise 'Homer CD for Pearl, and they eagerly accepted. Then came the task of selecting from her 156 published and 31 unpublished recordings. It wasn't easy, but for the most part Ward and I agreed.

One of our aims was to show my mother's versatility. She is often referred to as an 'opera singer,' as indeed she was. Mother loved singing in opera. It was almost second nature to her. She was a born actress and could lose herself in her parts, although she often bemoaned the fact that composers usually chose the contralto for the unsympathetic rôles. It was hard on us children, too. Mother explained to us that Dalilah really thought she was doing the right thing, so she wasn't really bad, but we still dreaded the moment when Caruso would cause the temple to fall on her.

Although mother's career in opera lasted over thirty years, her rôle as a singer didn't begin in opera. It began when she was fourteen years old and sang, not only the contralto part in the cantata, *Ruth, the Moabitess*, but the bass part as well, when the

basso had suddenly become ill. Later she was the alto soloist in important churches in Philadelphia and Boston. During the thirty years that she appeared in opera, she also frequently sang oratorio in the great festivals of her day, as well as concert performances with all the major symphony orchestras. During those years, she also gave many recitals, touring with her accompanist, but she never agreed to being away from her family for long periods at a stretch. In our mother's heart, her family always came first.

Mother enjoyed the personal contact with her audiences that her recitals provided, and they in turn loved the personal contact with her. She included arias from opera and oratorio, as well as songs in her recitals, so Ward and I have followed her example in this CD.

To open we chose the 'Che Faro' from Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* as it was her favourite rôle. 'When she mourned over Euridice you lost all sense of the fact that she was singing an aria,' my father wrote. But when she recorded this aria on 13 December, 1912, for the Victor Company at Camden, my father, who

usually went with her to her recording sessions, was ill and couldn't be there, so she wrote to him that night from Philadelphia: This is Friday the thirteenth so I ought to have good luck with the records I just made. I sang from 2:15 to 5 o' clock. I was *infine* voice. As fine as I could wish. But you never know how the records will turn out. I was in great voice in the fall and only one was good. I stood too *near*. My voice is so clear and facile this year. So today I stood much further away and I hope they will be good. I shall feel repaid if there are two perfect ones. I am satisfied to return again and do them over. It means so much to us and ours. [Their children]. I hope Requiem and Dearest are *fine*. They all loved your songs. 'Those are two beautiful songs of your husband's,' Mr. Rogers said. I hope they will be lovely. I did not do the Requiem phrases in one breath. I couldn't do it slow enough in one breath. I'm sorry. I made in all . . . "

And here she named eight recordings, four new and four repeats, of which Victor released seven. So she had the good luck she hoped for. Three of the new ones,

'Requiem/Dearest,' 'Babylon,' and 'Nancy Lee,' and the repeat of 'Che faro' are included here.

Mother recorded the great *Huguenots* aria, 'Nobil Signori,' four times, in 1903 (her first recording session), in 1904, 1906, and again on 13 December, 1912. They are all beautiful recordings and it was hard to decide, but we finally settled on the 1904. It has a fresh, youthful quality that fits the rôle.

The Prison Scene aria from *Le Prophète* Mother learned when she began studying in Paris with Fidel Koenig in 1898. 'He selected it as the number which would secure a possible engagement for her,' my father wrote. 'It ran from low G to high C, over two octaves and a half, and had colorature and sustained cantabile. My wife said she could never sing it. He said they would work on it for fifteen minutes every day at her lesson, and in short time she would be able to sing it.' Koenig was right. Six months later she sang it at her first audition and was given her first contract, to sing at the summer opera season at Vichy.

'Amour viens aider,' from *Samson et Dalila*, is a favourite of mine. 'Mon

Coeur' was a favourite of mother's and of her public's. If it wasn't on a programme it was demanded as an encore. All of the recordings – five published and four unpublished – are fine, but in the early acoustical recordings, her final A-flat, an interpolated note, was too powerful for the horn, so she had to turn her back and sing to the opposite corner of the room. In her published electrical recording of 'Mon Coeur,' she didn't sing A-flat for some reason, though she always sang it in recital. During the last four years of her career while I was serving as her accompanist, I always looked forward to that note. It grew and grew, and when I thought, This must be it, and was ready for the final chord, it suddenly opened out. It took one's breath away, and the applause was always deafening. We have therefore chosen one of the unpublished electrical recordings of this aria, which concludes with a stunning high A-flat.

Father's songs were widely sung in those days. Many singers, including Sembrich, Gadske, Nordica, and Gluck, used them in their programmes. Bispham, Whitehill,

and de Gogorza, among others, made recordings of them. Mother never failed to include a group of father's songs on her programmes, usually after the intermission. 'How's My Boy' invariably 'brought down the house' as we used to say. When she sang it she became the mother whose son was lost at sea. Her sob of despair at the end was real. The 'Song of the Shirt' also made a deep impression. Father's longing for justice and for the relief of the oppressed often influenced his choice of texts. 'I never enjoyed singing anything in my life as much as I did the 'Song of the Shirt,' Mother wrote Father after a recital. 'It is gloriously written for the voice and so singable and yet it is a sermon.' I suspect that its length, in spite of a cut, may have prevented its release. Both of these records can be included now because Mother saved the white label test pressings, published here for the first time.

The record of Father's setting of Mother Goose rhymes, heard here with piano accompaniment, was made as a test for the published recording with orchestra. The fact that she threw out the baby along

with the cradle instead of the other way around as it is written must have amused her. Mother had a delightful Scotch-Irish sense of humour. Also, the fact that the studio accompanist had not been informed that she planned to do both verses of that particular number seems to indicate that it wasn't intended as a take. But we all love this recording, mistakes and all.

'The Banjo Song,' written in a half hour in a hotel in Chicago while Mother and Father were on tour together, and which Father feared (and his colleagues agreed) was so light that it might ruin his reputation, turned out to be his most popular song, and is still sung today. The recording used here is an unpublished test from her first electrical recording session, and is her finest rendition of this song on record. 'Oh Thou That Tellest' was my father's favourite recording, and is one of mine. The study of religion played an important part in my mother's later years. 'I don't know anyone to whom the study of religion is such a living thing,' my father wrote. 'Her breadth of view and freedom from intolerance are

beyond anything I have ever known. 'Whenever I hear 'Ring Out Wild Bells,' I think of my mother as she stood in cap and gown in the pulpit of New York's St. Thomas's Church on New Year's Eve of 1918, soon after the Armistice, and at the stroke of midnight sang this great song. 'Ring in a thousand years of peace,' she sang, with such beauty, force, and conviction that I suspect there was hardly a dry eye in the church. It brings tears to my eyes even remembering it.

Mother enjoyed singing the light numbers with which she usually ended her programme. 'The people are tired,' she used to say. 'They want something light to go home with.' The Victor Company was always clamouring for them, too. Mother pored through old song books to find them. That was how she came across 'Whispering Hope,' which was unknown at that time, but remained the Victor Company's best seller for many years when she and Alma Gluck recorded it as a duet. Mother never sang down to these songs. There was no condescension in her manner or in her thoughts. She was having fun.

Her audience was having fun, too. The last number, 'Calm As The Night,' was one of Mother's favourites. 'I think this is an exceptionally good recording of my voice,' she wrote the Victor Company in July of 1927 when she was reporting on which takes she preferred of the numbers she had recorded the month before. 'It has given me greater pleasure than

any of my records have ever done. I hope others will agree with me. Time will tell.'

Time did tell. It was a very popular record. I know, of course, one reason why my mother thought so highly of it. It is a love song, and when she sang it she was singing it to my father. Theirs was a true love story.

LOUISE HOMER

I.

1. **Gluck** Orfeo ed Euridice - Che farò senza Euridice
(C-8611-3 88285 13 Dec. '12)
2. **Meyerbeer** Gli Ugonotti - Nobil signori, salute
(C-490-2 85005 1903-1904)
3. **Meyerbeer** Le Prophète - Ah!
X mon fils
(C-2602-3 88234 11 Oct. '09)
4. Le Prophète - O toi qui m'abandonnes
(C-491-1 85004 5 Oct. '03)
5. **Saint-Saëns** Samson et Dalila -
Amour, viens aider
(C-8295-1 88201 11 Oct. '09)
6. Samson et Dalila - Mon coeur
X s'ouvre à ta voix
(BVE-3863-9 unpublished 9 Oct. '28)

II.

7. **Songs of Sidney Homer**
Dearest
(C-12720-1 88407 13 Dec. '12)
8. Sing to me, Sing
(B-14909-2 87205 27 May, '14)
9. Requiem
(C-12720-1 88407 13 Dec. '12)
10. How's My Boy?
(B-18044-1 unpublished 30 June. '16)
11. The Song of the Shirt
(C-14902-1 unpublished 27 May, '14)
12. Mother Goose Songs
(C-test unpublished 27 Jan. '21)
13. Banjo Song
(BVE-9909-3 unpublished 23 Nov. '25)
- III.
14. **Handel** Messiah - O Thou That Tellest
(C-22629-2 88614 17 Mar. '19)

15. **Schubert** Die Allmacht

(C-8269-1 88231 11 Oct. '09)

16. **Watson** Babylon

(C-6039-4 88414 13 Dec. '12)

17. **Gounod** Ring Out, Wild Bells

(B-27966-1 (87375) 971 21 May, '23)

IV.

18. **Delibes** Les filles de Cadiz

(B-2601-1 81079 6 Jun. '05)

19. **Walthew** May Day

(B-620-1 81020 2 Nov. '03)

20. **Adams** Nancy Lee

(B-12413-2 (87109) unpublished 25
Sep. '12)

21. **Claribel** Janet's Choice

(B-18032-2 87262 29 Jun. '16)

22. **Tchaikovsky** Nur wer die

Sehnsucht kennt

(CVE-51980-2 unpublished 8 May '29)

23. **Bohm** Calm as the Night

(CVE-19396-3 6703 6 Jun. '27)

Dates, Matrix numbers, and take information have been verified from the files of the Encyclopedic Discography of Victor Recordings.

Total playing time: 77' 43"

Production and transfers: H Ward Marston

Photograph of Homer as Orfeo by A. Dupont, 1910.

Photograph of Louise and Sidney Home on their 40th Anniversary, January 1935.

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